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SOURCE Die Tat, No 31, 1950.SLAVE LABOR IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA'S URANIUM PITS

Die Tat attributes the following story to a man who escaped from a forced-labor camp in the Czech uranium mines.

Day after day the Czech prisons dispatch special transports to the uranium mines. The prisoners are bound and herded into cattle cars, with 40 heavily armed policemen to guard each group of 60. Lately, as many as 1,200 men arrive in the camp sector every night. Frequently, they are kept standing in the open for 24 hours, regardless of weather inclemencies, before being assigned to the various camps by a Russian Commission.

Jachymov, formerly an aristocratic spa in one of the deeply notched valleys of the Erzgebirge has become the center of a Uranium Combine which the Russians guard with all possible care. In prewar Czechoslovakia, 800 Sudeten German miners were employed in the silver mines of this region. By the autumn of 1949, as many as 14,600 political prisoners had been assigned to work in 11 labor camps. In the wake of the most recent wholesale arrests, this number has probably been doubled. The German prisoners of war who have been working in the uranium pits since 1945 are now being released, as the result of pressure brought to bear by Moscow; that is, they are required to sign statements to the effect that they are further obligating themselves to 2 years' "voluntary" labor in the mines. These men have been settled in the depopulated villages surrounding Jachymov.

Technically the labor camps fall under the administrative jurisdiction of the Mory Penitentiary near Pilsen. All transports are initially directed to the Vikmanov Central Camp near Jachymov. The Russians begin to come into evidence at the first roll call. A number of well-fed men in mufti test the physical strength of the prisoners and assign them to the various camps which have been set up along the well-proven German pattern: a barracks area measuring approximately 2 square kilometers, surrounded by a double wall and barbed wire, and guarded by six machine-gun turrets fitted with searchlights.

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There is a complete absence of sanitary installations and only four latrines are at the disposal of 500 men. The camp physician, formerly a prominent medical authority in Prague and now himself a prisoner, has no equipment whatever. Packages are prohibited and only one postcard may be sent or received every 6 months.

Civilian agents of the State Police work among the prisoners, in prison garb. An atmosphere of distrust and mutual hatred is fostered among the men. The camps are guarded by an inner and an outer circle. The former is composed of law enforcement militia while the latter consists of State Police. All police stations and border patrol posts in the vicinity of the camps are in constant contact by radiotelephone.

Among the inmates of these camps are priests and generals, businessmen, workers, and intellectuals. General Schipek [German approximation], who during World War II was decorated by the British House of Lords with the Order of the Garter for his achievements in the Near East, works side by side with General Prikryl, former Commander of Parachute Troops. University professors ply their picks and shovels together with their former students. An archbishop, accused of having read a mass in the barracks, was committed to solitary confinement in a dark cell. A well-known Prague athlete, who was mistreated by the guards during the morning roll call, hanged himself a few hours later. Among the most dreaded hours of the day are the morning and evening roll call, German fashion, when it is not uncommon for the victims to be forced to stand at attention in the pits, after work and with empty stomachs, for hours on end.

In recent weeks many new transports have arrived at the camps bringing the victims of the latest mass arrests among the bourgeoisie. Thousands of these persons were first herded into assembly camps near Prague, where they were classified. Those who were designated A were shipped to the uranium camps; those classified B were assigned to the construction of airfields; a third category was put to work in defense industry, and a fourth was assigned to cutting trees in the forests.

In the uranium camps the working day begins at 0500 hours, with black coffee, dry bread, and morning roll call. Unless the men are forced to stand at attention for many hours, they are sent down into the pits for 8 hours, followed by 3 hours' work at the surface. The prisoners work at an average level of 600 meters below the surface. With the most primitive tools they dig the pitchblende in narrow tunnels, where they are often knee-deep in water. Hourly "wages" for this labor amount to 15 hellers, out of which they are required to pay for a subscription to the central organ of the Communist Party, for the purpose of "furthering" their education.

During the afternoon work on the surface, they sort and wash the ore. The end of the working day is followed by evening roll call and another meal of soup and coffee. The greatest torment of the prisoners in some of the camps is the acute water shortage. Prisoners are given only a single cup of water per day, which must serve all purposes. Consequently, the men drink the water which trickles through the shafts and which, because of total lack of iodine content, causes serious thyroid disorders within a short time. A recent attempt on the part of the management to conduct river water into the camp, by means of a 25-kilometer pipe line, resulted in a typhus epidemic which spread from the camp into the surrounding localities. Jachymov had to be placed under quarantine for months. Goiter, typhus, and cancer of the liver, a result of uranium radiations, are the inexorable scourges of the uranium regions.

The Jachymov uranium deposits constitute the core of a uranium sector, the remainder of which is located in Saxony. No lines of demarcation are observed at the mines, however. Czech prisoners frequently dig in pits belonging to Saxony, while the Germans mine Bohemian ore.

The management, on both sides of the border, is Russian. The engineers, officials, and political agents are also Russian.

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